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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR UNSC MARR MOPS SY LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: NEA DAS HALE TO JUMBLATT: NO CHANGE IN
U.S. POLICY TOWARD SYRIA, LEBANON

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

¶1. (C) NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary David Hale reassured Druze leader Walid Jumblatt that, despite recent meetings between Secretary Rice and Assistant Secretary David Welch with Syrian Foreign Minister Moallem, there was no change in U.S. policy towards either Syria or Lebanon. DAS Hale also reaffirmed continuing U.S. support for the Lebanese Armed Forces. Jumblatt expressed concerns about continuing Sunni-Shia violence in northern Lebanon, claiming that Lebanese intelligence services were involved in some of the attacks. Reconciliation efforts between the Druze and Shia were continuing, but were aimed at preventing conflict and not an eventual political alliance, he said. Jumblatt also expressed frustration with March 14 Christian leaders, who continued to fight amongst themselves and push their own candidates at the expense of coalition unity. Jumblatt plans to visit the U.S. in mid-November. End summary.

¶2. (C) Druze and Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) leader Walid Jumblatt hosted a lunch October 5 at his home in Mukhtara for visiting NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary David Hale. The Ambassador, DCM, Pol/Econ Chief and Senior LES Political Advisor also attended.

HALE REASSURES JUMBLATT: NO CHANGE IN
U.S. POLICY TOWARDS LEBANON OR SYRIAN

¶3. (C) DAS Hale described President Sleiman's September 25 meeting with President Bush as successful, reestablishing normal relations between the two presidents after years of Syrian interference in Lebanon. He said the meeting between Secretary Rice and Syrian Foreign Minister Mouallem took place at the request of the Syrians, and that the Secretary used the meeting to convey the message directly that U.S. policy towards Lebanon remains unchanged. "In our private conversations with Syrian officials, the U.S. reiterated its support for Lebanon's true sovereignty and independence," DAS Hale told Jumblatt, adding that the Syrians must take clear steps, including implementation of UNSCR 1701, an end to arms smuggling to Hezbollah and to the facilitation of freedom fighters to Iraq, and the closing of the headquarters of Palestinian terrorist groups inside Syria.

¶4. (C) Jumblatt commented that the Syrians' goal is to engage the new U.S. administration. The Syrians were nervous about the Special Tribunal, he said, adding, "They are eager to know the outcome of the current investigation." DAS Hale agreed that the Tribunal was strong leverage against Syria.

...AND CONTINUING SUPPORT FOR ARMY

¶5. (C) DAS Hale, noting that his visit was in part to participate in the first ever Joint Military Commission between Lebanon and the U.S., reaffirmed continuing U.S. commitment to assist the Lebanese Armed Forces. Stressing that this was a long-term process, he said that at the end of the program the U.S. would have completed training all of the LAF special forces and diminished the impact of years of Syrian influence from the LAF.

JUMBLATT CONCERNED ABOUT SUNNI-SHIA VIOLENCE IN THE NORTH...

¶6. (C) Jumblatt reported that tensions between the Sunnis and the Shia were still high as a result of the May clashes. He praised Sunni leader Saad Hariri's efforts to calm things down, noting that Hariri was paying compensation to families of victims who suffered from the recent round of violence in Tripoli, as well as those affected by the tragedies of the mid-eighties in northern Lebanon. DAS Hale also acknowledged Hariri's efforts, commenting that "Hariri took some serious steps in that regard."

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¶7. (C) Jumblatt hinted that intelligence services were involved in carrying out the recent attacks in Tripoli. "I hope these intelligence services become wiser," he said, warning that Syria would use the attacks to justify a comeback to Lebanon. Jumblatt was critical of Wissam Hassan, head of the Internal Security Forces intelligence unit, saying, "Wissam is bypassing his immediate commander, General Ashraf Rifi, as well as Minister of Interior Ziad Baroud." Jumblatt also criticized the long-term detainment of some Sunni activists from the north, which was providing the Salafist movement with excuses to stage demonstrations and protests in the country. "Let them be sent to court and whoever is innocent should be released," he said.

¶8. (C) Jumblatt stressed the need for sustainable economic development in north Lebanon, suggesting five projects the GOL should focus on to promote employment: The Tripoli commercial exhibition center, the port, Kleyate/Rene Mouawad Airport, the oil refinery, and the railway, of which the last three are non-operational. Currently, he said, many people from the north rely on either the LAF or charity from Tripoli political leaders such as Hariri, Mohammad Safadi, and former PM Najib Mikati. "This is not enough," Jumblatt said; "sustainable development programs should be implemented."

...WHILE RECONCILING DRUZE AND SHIA IN THE MOUNTAINS

¶9. (C) Jumblatt, who met with rival Druze leader and Minister of Youth and Sports Talal Arslan on October 4, said the purpose of the meeting was to follow up on reconciliation efforts between the Druze and Shia in the Chouf and Aley mountain areas. The situation was more complicated in the predominantly Druze coastal city of Choueifat, he noted, which witnessed a "bloodshed" during the May events, making reconciliation more difficult. Jumblatt said he was stressing to his supporters that reconciliation is a much better and safer approach than confrontation. However, he added, reconciliation did not mean there would be a political alliance with March 8 during the 2009 parliamentary elections.

...AND EXASPERATED WITH CHRISTIANS

¶10. (C) Jumblatt confirmed that March 14 leaders already are consulting to come up with unified lists of candidates to run in the 2009 elections, adding that each party would have to make sacrifices to ensure a March 14 victory. In particular, Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Samir Geagea should avoid naming his own candidates in districts where LF is unpopular, because that would drive Christian voters to the lists backed by Michel Aoun. Jumblatt stressed the need for March 14 instead to encourage independent Christian figures such as former MP Salah Honein and Edmond Gharios (son-in-law of Michel Murr). In addition, the "animosity" between March 14 allies Amine Gemayel and Samir Geagea needed to be resolved, as well as the bad relations between MPs Samir Franjieh and Nayla Mouawad.

¶11. (C) Jumblatt deplored the nomination of Nadim Gemayel (twenty-something son of late President Bachir Gemayel) for the Maronite seat of Beirut, advocating instead former Justice Minister Charles Rizk, who had done a lot for March 14 through his support for the Special Tribunal. Jumblatt also criticized Geagea's efforts to reelect LF MP Georges Adwan in the Chouf. "Geagea should support the candidacy of Dory Chamoun in the Chouf as compensation for the assassination of Dory's brother, Dany, and his family," he said, hinting at Geagea's role in the assassination.

JUMBLATT PLANNING TO VISIT THE U.S.

¶12. (C) Jumblatt said he plans to travel to the U.S. for a November 15 meeting with members of the Druze community in Los Angeles. (Note: In a separate meeting with Pol/Econ

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Chief on October 2, Druze MP Wael Abu Four said March 14 was considering sending a delegation of March 14 leaders to Washington. End note.)

¶13. (U) DAS Hale has cleared this cable.
SISON